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Engagement, conduct of life and dropouts in the Danish vocational education and training (VET) system

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ABSTRACT

This study provides support for the idea that school engagement is a central concept when trying to understand the dropout process. One of the strengths of this concept is that it involves understanding dropping out as a process, rather than as an event. However, the concept of school engagement also presents a number of problems. It tends to be functionalistic in nature: Processes of students' school engagement and disengagement are partly the consequences of institutional initiatives – for example, how teachers act or how the school environment is organised. Furthermore, mainstream dropout researchers formulate the concept of engagement both simplistically and mechanistically by seeing engagement as something that the students possess to varying degrees. Inspired by critical psychology, this study includes a different concept of student engagement: We must take the students' life conduct as the point of departure when approaching their school engagement and decision to drop out. The theoretical claims in the paper are substantiated by empirical results from 160 interviews with vocational educational and training (VET) students in the Danish VET system, and this paper will show how school engagement is closely related to the events in the other contextual settings of students' lives.

Today, nearly 40% of all Danish vocational educational and training (VET) students drop out of the VET system (Munk and Park 2014). This is a huge societal, educational and economic problem. It is important to understand why so many students drop out. Therefore, the overall aims of this paper are to discuss students' school engagement in relation to processes of dropping out and to formulate a nuanced and differentiated understanding of school engagement and disengagement in this regard. More specifically, this paper will elaborate on the ways in which school disengagement and the tendency to drop out are related to the students' cross-contextual participation. In this respect, the paper aims to re-frame the notion of school engagement and dropping out into a critical psychological frame that focuses on the students' conduct of everyday life to understand their main reasons for dropping out of the Danish VET system.

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Dropout researchers have asserted that students' decisions to drop out of an education programme are the result of a disengagement process, rather than as a consequence of a single event (Alexander, Entwisle, and Kabbani 2001). An interview excerpt from the study presented in this paper with a VET student gives an example of the disengagement process that led this student to consider dropping out of his education:

> **I:** Are there any special events or experiences that have made you think, 'Okay, now I'd like stay in school a little longer' or 'That's it, now I am stopping.' Is there anything in particular that made you make such a decision?
>
> **S:** Well, it is more like that you run into a number of events in which you do not think that you can overcome things anymore. Then nothing matters anymore. Something happens at home, and then nothing else matters. You just stop and try to get away from everything.

This student's decision to drop out was not the result of a single event; instead, it was the result of a process in which a number of events related to the school and events outside the school made this student consider dropping out. The concept of student engagement and disengagement is thus important when understanding the process of dropping out (McMahon and Zyngier 2009). This paper will include a critical discussion of this concept.

Although the conventional conception of dropping out (Finn 1989; Newmann, Wehlage, and Lamborn 1992) has merit, it also has a number of shortcomings. The conventional conception of student engagement and disengagement (as formulated by Finn 1989; Newmann, Wehlage, and Lamborn 1992) tends to be functionalistic. Its proponents see student engagement and disengagement as results of how teachers act or how the school environment is organised.

The first part of this paper lays out how conventional dropout researchers formulate the concept of engagement and disengagement both simplistically and mechanistically and view engagement as something that students possess to varying degrees (McMahon and Portelli 2004). Inspired by critical psychology, the second part of the paper lays out a different perspective on student engagement that emphasises the need take into consideration the students' life conduct (Holzkamp 1995; Dreier 2003) as the point of departure when approaching student retention and dropout rates. The theoretical claims in the paper will be substantiated by empirical material from 160 interviews with students in the Danish VET system. The results from the interviews are part of a larger research project about retention and dropout rates in the Danish VET system.

About the Danish VET system

The Danish upper secondary educational system is divided into two separate tracks: One track is the VET system, and the other track is the Gymnasium, or academic path. Approximately 30% of youths choose the VET system, while the other 70% choose the Gymnasium. In general, the number of students who select the Gymnasium is growing.

The Danish VET system is based on the dual training principle; in other words, the time spent in college alternates with time spent in training at a company. The vocational and educational programme is divided into two parts: a basic course that is broad in its scope, and a main course in which the trainee specialises in a craft or a trade.

There are 12 basic courses. Eleven of these courses offer technical training that is highly flexible and individualised, while one course covers the mercantile part of the vocational education. A basic course may last from 10 to 60 weeks, depending on the proficiency level,

desires and needs of the individual trainee. The basic courses for commercial training (i.e. business) last 38 or 76 weeks, followed by a main course lasting two or three years. Most VET programmes last four years.

It is up to the VET students to find their training positions and, consequently, one of the major problems of the Danish VET system has been to secure enough training positions. From October 2011 to September 2012, 44,829 training agreements were made between a VET student and a company. In September 2012, 9741 VET students did not have a training slot; 64% of VET students dropped out of the basic course while attending VET school, and 36% of the VET students dropped out of the main course.

To respond to increasing globalisation and the outsourcing of jobs abroad, in 2006 the Danish Government decided to increase the general educational level in Denmark. The government set a goal that 95% of youth should have an upper secondary education. In the following years, this 95% aim has been discussed in the Danish media with a focus on the lack of training positions. In November 2012, the Danish Government earmarked 3.1 billon D.kr. to strengthen the Danish VET system by creating centres of practice (*praktikcentre*) that can help and support VET students in finding training places (UVM 2012).

Engagement, disengagement and dropping out

In recent years, scholars have developed different conceptions of student engagement; however, in this context, we will focus on the conventional version of the concept, which dominates the research literature (McMahon and Portelli 2004; McMahon and Zyngier 2009). Scholars have used the concepts of school engagement and students' engagement and disengagement interchangeably in the research literature. 'Engagement' is a broad term for the students being engaged in school activities.

Researchers have characterised students' engagement as consisting of three components: behavioural engagement, emotional engagement, and cognitive engagement (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004). Behavioural engagement is related to the notion of participation, including involvement in academic and social or extra-curricular activities; scholars consider this involvement important to achieving positive academic outcomes and preventing dropping out. Emotional engagement includes positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics and schools; scholars have presumed it creates a sense of identification with an institution and influences the students' willingness to do work. Finally, cognitive engagement draws on the idea of investment by incorporating students' thoughtfulness and willingness to make the effort necessary to comprehend complex ideas and learn difficult skills (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004). The dynamics of student engagement rest on psychological processes (Finn 1989). Researchers have asserted that the link between dropping out and student engagement is based on the psychological dynamics formulated in the 'frustration–self-esteem' model (Finn 1989; Finn and Voelkl 1993).

In the empirical research on the topic, scholars have argued that dropout behaviour is closely associated with student engagement and disengagement. Several studies have shown that behavioural disengagement is a precursor of dropping out (Ekstrom et al. 1986; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004). These findings indicate that students who eventually drop out do less homework, exert less effort in school, participate less in school activities and have more discipline problems at school (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004). Other studies have demonstrated the correlations between low behavioural engagement and

cutting class, skipping school, suspension and retention (Connell, Spencer, and Aber 1994; Connell et al. 1995). Students from a higher socio-economic background with well-educated parents seem to have higher school engagement than their counterparts from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Atweh et al. 2008). In a study using both quantitative and qualitative material, Martinez and Munday (1998) show that dropping out is a complex social, individual and institutional phenomenon, and they show dropping out is among other things closely related to the students' personal circumstances.

Researchers have argued that alienation – feelings of estrangement and social isolation – increase the dropout rate (Finn 1989; Mehan et al. 1996). Large schools seem to reduce student engagement (Finn and Voelkl 1993). Engagement in class and school activities among high-risk students is greater in smaller schools than in larger schools. Smaller schools and positive student–teacher relationships seem to produce a higher level of school engagement (Lee and Burkam 2003).

Critics of the conventional concept of student engagement

The conventional concept of school engagement in relation to dropping out has been the subject of many critiques (McMahon and Portelli 2004; Atweh et al. 2008; McMahon and Zyngier 2009). Critics have argued that the conventional definition of student engagement stems from a strong behaviourist tradition and is founded on a narrow psychological understanding of the concept (McMahon and Portelli 2004). These critics have claimed that this notion of student engagement is too linear and mechanical, existing on a continuum from less to more.

This fundamentally functionalistic viewpoint focuses on the consequences of what teachers do to students, instead of on something that students and teachers generate together. The assumption is that if teachers do x, y and z or exhibit dispositions a, b and c, then the students will engage (McMahon and Portelli 2004; McMahon and Zyngier 2009). In other words, there is a tendency to perceive student engagement as a function of the teachers' activities. Conventional scholars consequently associate engagement with academic success and with the conditions and the criteria determined by the teacher (McMahon and Portelli 2004, 62). They view student engagement as a personal trait without considering the processes of social negotiation that are involved (Jonasson 2012).

Finally, scholars have viewed student engagement as an indicator of the student's commitment not only to education, but to the goals and values held by the school and the educational system (McMahon and Portelli 2004). Students dropping out of school as a result of disengaged teaching and mandatory classes in subject matters of little or no relevance for the students will, in a conventional approach, lead to dropping as a consequence of the students being disengaged. This conception of engagement seems, therefore, to be a measure of the students' adherence to a dominant educational regime at the school. In other words, the conception of engagement seems to favour those students who accept the mainstream functionalities and conception of education (Giroux 1983; McMahon and Portelli 2004).

Within the research field of engagement, it has been discussed critically whether engagement and motivation are the same or different conceptual constructs. However, the relationship between engagement and motivation is complicated and based on different theoretical traditions (Christenson and Reschly 2012). Some researchers use the terms engagement and motivation interchangeably (e.g. Martin 2007); others have suggested that the construct

of engagement subsumes motivation (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, and Paris 2004), while others subscribe to the position that engagement and motivation are distinct but related constructs wherein motivation represents intention and engagement is embedded in action (Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong 2008). This paper is inspired by Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong's (2008) differentiation. Motivation is understood in terms of the direction, intensity and quality of one's energies, answering the question of 'why am I doing this?' for a specific behaviour (Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong 2008). In this regard, motivation is related to underlying psychological processes, including autonomy, relatedness/belonging and competence (Ryan and Deci 2002). Engagement is described as 'energy in action, the connection between person and activity' and reflects a person's active involvement in a task or activity (Appleton, Christenson, and Furlong 2008). This understanding of engagement is in line with this paper's theoretical framework embedded in critical psychology, placing a great deal of emphasis on a person's social activities.

Reformulating student engagement in a cross-contextual perspective

The following text provides another approach to student engagement and disengagement. Based on critical psychology (Holzkamp 1995; Dreier 2003), this notion of student engagement incorporates the students' life conduct.

Rather than designating persons based on how they participate in one context, such as the school context, critical psychology has suggested shifting the focus to how students conduct their lives in a trajectory of their participation in and across various social contexts, such as their homes, schools and workplaces (Dreier 2003). As one moves from one context to another, one's position varies, as do his or her possibilities, resources and influence. Therefore, it takes different personal action potencies to participate in different social contexts; people participate in different ways for different reasons (Dreier 2003). Faced with this complexity, people must compose and conduct their everyday lives in and across different places in ways that depend on their varying personal scopes.

Expanding the understanding of how people integrate their activities across contexts requires a closer look at the concept of the conduct of everyday life (Holzkamp 1995; Dreier 2003; Nielsen 2008) as a central tool for conceptualising students' school engagement. The conduct of everyday life is the process by which people make active efforts aimed at integrating their different activities into a coherent whole. This process is not possible without minor and major conflicts, excuses, or deceptions (Holzkamp 1995). In other words, subjects actively organise their everyday lives by regulating their activities in various contextual settings.

According to Holzkamp (1995), people must establish ways to conduct their everyday lives in relation to the socially arranged rhythms of activities across social times and places. They must develop sequences of activities and make them routine in order to be able to accomplish what must be done. Following this line of thinking, people must come to an understanding with themselves and other co-participants about how to conduct their lives with each other and individually. The ways of living one's ordinary life include inter-subjective reciprocity with other individuals' conduct of their everyday lives (Holzkamp 1995; Nielsen 2008). This changing complexity of personal lives across life trajectories implies that people must attend to the ways they direct, locate and order the pursuit of their various personal concerns across time and place (Dreier 2003). This involves being aware of the distinctions between their participation in different contexts and the various goals they pursue.

From the perspective of critical psychology, students' school engagement must be understood as a part of how one conducts one's activities in various contextual settings. This perspective relates to making sense of one's specific activities in different contextual settings. Students orient their activities and future participation in different social practices and everyday life outside the vocational school.

In this respect, critical psychology offers another understanding of engagement in comparison to the one suggested by a more conventional approach to student engagement. The conventional perspective sees student engagement as a function of institutional initiatives. Alternatively, a critical psychological perspective on student engagement views the person as active and participating in a number of different contextual settings, rather than focusing on the students' activities in one context. In this perspective, being engaged in a school setting is only a part of a student's everyday activities. Furthermore, the student's school engagement must be understood in relation to his or her engagement in other contextual settings and depends on the resources he or she has for integrating these activities.

Consequently, understanding why students are engaged or disengaged in their education requires focusing on the reasons the students give for conducting their lives as they do. Understanding how the processes of disengagement lead to dropping out necessitates an expansion of the concept of student engagement to encompass the students' activities in other contextual settings besides the school environment. The empirical materials from the interviews conducted with VET students will help to outline this aspect of how to better understand student engagement and dropping out. The next section includes a brief description of the methodological considerations of the project.

Methodological considerations

This paper is based on 160 interviews with vocational students from eight different VET schools; 106 of the participants were interviewed in 2009–2010 when they were taking basic courses in a vocational school, and 54 of these students were re-interviewed approximately one year later. The reason why the students were re-interviewed was to focus on the changes the students had made in relation to dropping out or deciding to complete their education. In other words, we sought an understanding of the processes leading the students to drop out or stay in education, rather than merely getting the students' point of view at a particular time. The selection of the eight schools was based on an initial benchmark analysis, which included all Danish vocational schools and where their dropout rates were corrected for differences in the students' socio-economic status background (Jensen and Larsen 2011). Four schools that did well in retaining students and four schools that were less successful in the benchmark analysis were selected for the qualitative study.

We chose to interview the students who were at the highest risk of dropping out. Students were selected to obtain a sample that was representative of students at risk of dropping out; for example, women in educational fields dominated by men, men in educational fields dominated by women, students who did not live with both biological parents at the age of 15, students whose parents have only a very low level of education (no high school or college diploma or basic technical or business education), and ethnic minority students. A few students who did not share these individual background factors also participated in the interviews. Furthermore, the selection of students took place in cooperation with representatives of college administrators and teachers so that their assumptions as to what constitutes

a student at risk of dropping out of college and their judgement of which students would be able to handle an interview and further studies were also taken into account.

Among all of the participants in this study, 64% were male and 36% were female. The students' ages ranged from 15 years (1%) to 49 (1%). Most of the students were 16–20 years of age (84%), with an average age of 19 years (18.87). We selected the students who represented 10 out of 12 basic courses representing a large variety of occupational areas. Seven per cent of the interviewed students came from the production and development programme; 3% came from electricity, management and IT; 12% came from motor vehicle, aircraft, and other transportation means; 20% came from building and construction; 27% came from business; 14% came from human food; 4% came from body and style programmes; and 10% came from construction and user service. No students from animals, plants and nature, health care or pedagogy programmes were interviewed.

We conducted the first round of interviews in a school setting, while the majority of the second round of interviews was conducted outside the school in cafés, in the students' homes or at their new educational institutions. All of the students had the opportunity to refuse the interviews, and all gave their informed consent to participate in the study. All of the students in the first round of interviews accepted that we would contact them again if we wished to do a second interview.

During the second round of interviewing, none of the students we contacted refused to participate. Due to the time and economic constraints of the project, we decided to re-interview only half of the participants. However, we could not get in touch with 12 students because they had changed their telephone numbers. Of the 54 VET students we re-interviewed, 23% of them had dropped out, 12% had begun studying elsewhere, 41% had found a training place and 24% had continued their education, often in an extended basic course.

We worked with the semi-structured interview approach (Kvale 1996). The themes in the interview guide were based on previous research within the area, and the themes were the students' personal history, the students experience of the education and teaching situations, the relationship to the teachers, the relationship to the other students, how engaged the students were in completing the education, the relationship to external persons (family/ friends), important turning points in the student's educational trajectory, the relationship to work life and the possibilities of getting a training place and, finally, future aspirations.

We made verbatim transcriptions of the interview recordings after getting the approval of the interviewees. We analysed the transcribed interviews by using a modified version of a pattern outlined by Giorgi (1985). In this analytical strategy, we systematically singled out units of meaning from the interview texts based on the themes formulated in the interview guide. A number of cross-contextual themes became central when analysing the interview material in relation to understanding processes of dropping out and school engagement. These themes were problems related to peer groups, substance abuse problems, family problems, the use of families as resources, problems with finding a training place and a general feeling of uncertainty. We used Nvivo9 research software in analysing the interviews. We identified patterns within the units of meaning and structured them into a unified whole. After reading through the interviews a couple of times, we coded the interviewees' statements based on the themes mentioned above. If we take the statement from the beginning of this article, it could be coded as related to external persons and events. In some cases, the statements urged us to add a new category to the themes. If we take the quote in the beginning of this article again, the statement made it clear to us that there was an important

process dimension to engagement and dropping out that we needed to integrate in our understanding of the phenomenon. During the analysis, it became clear to us that there were different patterns in the students statements about dropping out that were closely related to the life the students lived outside the educational institution. We analysed these patterns and began differentiating the statements conceptually into a spatial dimension (being focused on students' engagement being divided between different contexts and being engaged by what is happening in other contexts) and a temporal dimension (being certain/uncertain about the future). These categories became the foundation for the paragraphs presented below. The quotations in this article are those that best illustrate the research issues, and all of the names that were used are pseudonyms.

Results from the empirical material

The empirical materials revealed that school engagement is closely related to the students' conduct of their everyday lives; in other words, in the other contextual settings of their lives. Although conventional researchers have often viewed the link between institutional life and the students' school engagement as a functional relationship (McMahon and Portelli 2004; Atweh et al. 2008; McMahon and Zyngier 2009), our results showed that student engagement has cross-contextual and temporal dimensions. Central to both of these dimensions is the idea that attending school is only a part of the students' everyday conduct of life.

To understand the meaning of being engaged in the school context, it is important to focus on what is happening in other contextual settings of the students' lives. In the cross-contextual dimension of student engagement, the focus is on how activities in other contextual settings in different ways are related to or separated from what is happening in a school context and how this influences the students' school engagement. In the temporal dimension, the focus is on the students' personal histories and future aspirations, and the impact these aspects have on the students' school engagement.

In a cross-contextual dimension: Engagement divided

A number of the VET students who traditionally could be characterised as being at risk are, in many cases and for different reasons, engaged in contexts outside the VET school. This is where they invest their energy, and they have difficulties integrating these activities with their participation in a school context. These students divide their engagement for a number of reasons. Therefore, students' school engagement is not necessarily a function of what the school is offering or what the teachers are doing. The following section provides a short account of the different descriptions the students gave for dividing their engagement.

One of the central contexts for most of the students in this category was being with peers outside school. Being a part of social activities with peers was central for most of the students, but some students became absorbed in the activities of their peers. In some cases, peers who were skipping school or who were unemployed seemed to pull other students away from school due to the pressure of being a part of a particular peer group. One of the students discussed his low level of school engagement, which he attributed to his friends coming around and picking him up when he was attending school: 'It was my friends. They came around all the time'. When asked if it was difficult for him to concentrate, he said, 'Yes'.

Some of the older students' families strongly influenced their school engagement. In some cases, the students had problems with their families, and the fights they had negatively impacted the students' level of school engagement. In other cases, some of the students already had families of their own, which could constrain the students' participation in social activities at school, making them feel like outsiders or not part of the class. Some of the students with families needed to choose educational institutions close to their homes, and others needed to work while attending school to support their families, which negatively influenced their school engagement.

However, in this context, having a family is not necessarily negative. It can also encourage the students to link their engagement in a school setting to their engagement in an external context. A female student in her mid-20s who had dropped out of a number of different educational institutions argued that growing older and having a couple of kids enhanced her school engagement: 'I believe that because one has grown older, and now I have the responsibility for two children, … I do not think that they'll say, when they grow older, "My mother is at home and is doing nothing"'. This student's school engagement was not a function of activities of the school, but a result of the student maturing, raising a family and becoming a role model for her children.

Membership in peer groups had another effect on the students' school engagement: a number of the students had significant substance abuse problems, which makes it difficult for them to be engaged in the VET school. One of the female students trying to become a painter explained that half of her class would smoke hashish, both in their spare time and during school. During breaks, some of the students would smoke together: 'It was more like, "Do you want to go out and smoke a joint?" And you would go out and find a stupid place to smoke'. One of the consequences of her substance abuse was that she had a hard time concentrating: 'I couldn't think straight'. She began her pattern of substance abuse at the same time that she moved to her own place with another female student and away from her parents. Although they did not describe it as an addiction problem, a number of the male students seemed to be engrossed in playing on computers most of the night, making them tired and preventing them from feeling energetic or prepared for their assignments the next day in class.

These examples illustrate the premise that low student engagement is not necessarily linked to particular activities at the school or to what the teacher is doing. Instead, it is closely related to students' activities in other contexts and the failure of the students to integrate their activities with school activities. When students have a low level of school engagement, in many cases it is because they are engaged in other activities outside of school contexts.

It is not merely a matter of students being influenced by what is happening to them in other contexts outside school. In an indirect fashion, the students are also influenced by what their peers are doing and how they relate to school. The students' conduct in everyday life influences and shapes how other students perceive being in school. When some students have low levels of school engagement because they are involved in activities outside school, it can have a great impact on other students' school engagement. One of the students who had personal problems outside school described how the other students' absenteeism seemed to be contagious.

I am one of those who have a lot of truancy in my class. You know actually it is because I have had other kinds of problems. But I think that they sharpen their attention about students being absent (…). Students in our class, it is total relaxation, if I have to be quite honest. People are

coming and going as it pleases them. One day they attend class and the next day they are not there. Sometimes they are there and another week they are gone (…). It is contagious. Earlier, I was working on a team, but now my team has dissolved. Some have been thrown out or have dropped out, or have moved to another school because things are so relaxed here.

As indicated in the quote, students who divide their engagement between the school and activities outside of school seem to reinforce the tendency for other students to do the same things. Students' low school engagement is a result of complex interactions between students in school and their conduct of everyday life outside school.

Being more engaged by what is happening in other contexts

In a number of cases, things happening in other contexts had a great impact on the students' school engagement. As mentioned earlier, the Danish VET system is a dual system in which most of the education takes place in an enterprise. For the moment, the lack of training position is a huge problem for the students at the VET schools. If the VET students already have a training slot or if they succeed in getting one while attending school, then the students' school engagement considerably increases. Getting a training place makes attending school relevant in quite another way in comparison to attending school and not having a training position. If the students do not find a training placement in an enterprise, it often has a negative impact on their school engagement.

Since only a few of the students interviewed had found a training opportunity, the inability to find one was a central and recurrent theme. Most of the students argued that the lack of a training position had a great impact on their school engagement and their contemplation of dropping out of their education. When asked if he dropped out mostly because he did not find a training slot, one of the students said, 'Yes, mostly. If I had found a training place, I would have completed the education'.

Finding a training opportunity has a huge impact on the students' engagement:

I: I was wondering if there a difference between how motivated students are compared to those students who do not have training place.

S: Yes, very much.

I: How is that detectable?

S: You can see that if they are over 18 most of them out there are just lazy and about to receive their governmental benefit (SU).

In this case, school engagement was closely related to events happening outside the school context. It was not a function of what the teachers and the school were doing.

According to the students, finding a training opportunity is a crucial step in becoming a skilled person earning a decent wage and possibly finding a long-term job. As emphasised in the quote above, if students do not find a training place, they dissociate from the school for part of their education because they are not able to see the relevance of education when they do not have a training opportunity.

School engagement in a temporal dimension

When addressing students' school engagement as something closely linked to activities outside of school, other factors include the students' aspirations and hopes for the future. There is a temporal dimension when discussing how school engagement is closely related

to what students are doing in other contextual settings. It is important to emphasise that students attend school to accomplish something outside of school, such as getting a good job or making money. Ideas or aspirations of what a school education may lead to influence the students' school engagement.

The following section provides two examples of how future aspirations influenced the students' school engagement. The first example relates to many students' uncertainty about what they wanted to do with their education. This uncertainty influenced the students' school engagement. The second example focuses on students who already found a training place and how this sense of security influenced their school engagement.

Being uncertain about the future

The students had a number of different reasons for choosing the VET programme. Some of the students had clear ideas about what they wanted to do with their education. In the following section, the focus will be on the large group of VET students who were uncertain about the future they would like to pursue after they finished their education.

A number of students use the VET programme as a kind of waiting room because they are undecided about what kind of education they should choose. These students are often uncertain and have often chosen the VET programme because it gives them more time to come to terms with the kind of education and job they would like to pursue. This uncertainty influences the students' school engagement.

Most of the students described in this paragraph chose the business course because it was organised such that the students would receive two years of a traditional school education if they chose this programme; thus, this choice would give them more time to decide which occupation to pursue. Most of them knew they did not want to pursue an academic line of education such as that offered by the Danish Gymnasium, but they had only vague ideas about what they wanted to do with their education. One of the students put it this way:

> To be honest, I chose this education because I do not know what else to do. I had the idea that I would like to work in a fashion shop but during my education I realized that it wasn't me at all. So now I might as well finish it, as I might use it later in life.

Some students used the VET programme option to pinpoint the kind of education they would like to pursue:

> I am very undecided because I do not know what I want (…) when you chose one way, others will be closed for you. And then you have to start all over. I think it is difficult with all this education.

Other students did not get the opportunity to enter the educational path that they had envisioned, so they had to choose the business course and wait to become more qualified to enter their dream education.

The group of undecided and uncertain students seemed to reinforce a low degree of school engagement. One of the students described a typical class situation: the other students would sit and eat and drink in class and talk on their phones. They were also permitted to use Facebook during classes. Another student added that if the teaching was dull, then the students would stay home and sleep. The last student observed that 20 out of 39 students in her class were thrown out due to too many absences.

When school has the status of a waiting room for a large group of students who are uncertain about what they want to do with their education, it appears that students lose focus and are not able to see the relevance of what is happening in their classes. This leads

to a low degree of school engagement and, in many respects, such a mindset is spreading, as already mentioned above. One of the students confessed that it was easy to join in when the others in the class were making noise:

> It is annoying because when I am sitting in there, there is always somebody who is sitting and fooling around and sometimes I join in. Not always, but sometimes one says to oneself, 'Now I do not bother doing anything anymore. Now I want to be exactly like everyone else.'

Being certain about the future

A number of VET students had a clear concept of what they would like to do with their education, and some of the students had social backgrounds with significant personal resources for pursuing these goals. In a number of cases, the students' school engagement was closely linked to their upbringing and to the activities of their families, and this link was reinforced by their families when attending school. In a sense, they inherited an engagement in the craft they were pursuing when taking a particular educational route and attending vocational school. Again, school engagement was closely related to activities occurring in previous contexts.

For some students, what appeared to be a high degree of school engagement was, instead, a consequence of the students' strong social bonds that provided them with significant personal work experiences. A number of the students interviewed were from families in which both parents had a craft education and had worked as craftsmen all their lives. Several of the students had been part of their parents' activities in different ways and knew the crafts from personal participation. In one of the interviews, one of the students responded to a question about having always wanted to be a mechanic: 'Yes, I have always thought it was funny to have something to screw in and thought that working with cars is the greatest, so I have always known that this is what I wanted to do'. When asked where this interest came from, the student responded, 'My dad works as an independent mechanic with his own garage, so I grew up there and thought it was great'.

A number of students who are already engaged and interested in the crafts master some of the basic techniques, which makes them less vulnerable when they are confronted with inadequate teaching situations. A general critique of the qualitative study is that the teachers are often absent from class, but this is of less importance to the students who grew up in craft families. One of the masonry students gave a good description:

> Well, I am fairly competent in laying bricks, so I do not need so much help because I have helped my father so many times. Sometimes, I tell some of the others how one goes about laying bricks because they have a hard time figuring it out. Perhaps when it gets a little more difficult, I might need a teacher, but for now it is okay.

In many cases, the students who come from homes where they grew up with exposure to a craft have the best chances of finding a training opportunity. They have a social network they can use, and they know who and how to approach a master craftsman. Finally, they are often genuinely engaged in the craft and this level of interest makes them more persistent in searching for a training place. Again, the students' school engagement is closely related to social arrangements outside the school context.

Discussion

School engagement is a central concept when trying to understand the processes of dropping out. One of the strengths of this concept is that dropping out is a process, rather than

an event. However, the notion of school engagement also has some shortcomings. The conception of students' school engagement tends to be functionalistic, in that scholars see processes of student engagement and disengagement as a consequence of institutional initiatives; for example, how teachers act or how the school environment is organised.

When addressing issues of school engagement, the results from the empirical part of the study show that the students' engagement has cross-contextual and temporal dimensions. A number of the VET students who were interviewed were engaged differently and for different reasons in contexts outside the VET school; this participation had a great impact on the students' school engagement. The students were engaged in maintaining and developing peer group relations and facing problems with family members. Some students were also facing substance abuse problems, while others experienced difficulties integrating family life and school life. Furthermore, not having a training opportunity after the completion of classroom education had a great impact on the students' school engagement. Finally, in the interviews, it was underlined that being uncertain about what the school education was leading to also had an impact on the students' school engagement. These results suggest that we need to reconsider the theoretical framework used to comprehend school engagement. Rather than seeing students' activities such as school engagement as a function of school initiatives, we need to take the students' participation in various contextual settings as a point of departure. The students' engagement should be seen as a part of their multi-contextual participation, where they are trying to coordinate their different activities in the various contexts of which they are a part. This change in theoretical perspective on school engagement from seeing school engagement as merely a function of initiatives within the frame of the school institution to focusing on how the students integrate activities within and across the school setting invites us to re-think how it could be possible to elevate the students' level of school engagement. When approaching school engagement and processes of dropping out, we need to start out by understanding the students' everyday participation in various contextual settings and how these contexts are connected and disconnected, how access is facilitated and what kinds of barriers there are for the students' participation. By focusing on the students' cross-contextual participation, the institutional boundaries of the school become a central issue that merits further analysis. It is interesting that the boundaries of the school's responsibility played such an insignificant role in interviews. None of the interview subjects seemed to question what the school should do and what is not its responsibility.

As outlined by Dreier, educational institutions should be oriented at being 'downwards' and 'outwards' to what is useful for the students in other contexts, rather than legitimising educational activities 'upwards' in the educational system (Dreier 2003, 23). If we take the stand suggested by critical psychology, which focuses on the students' conduct within everyday life, we might challenge the boundaries and responsibilities of the educational institutions. As suggested by Lave (1996),

> Teaching (…) is a cross-context, facilitative effort to make high quality educational resources truly available for communities of learners. Great teaching in schools is a process of facilitating the circulation of school knowledgeable skill into the changing identities of students. Teachers are probably recognized as 'great' when they are intensely involved in communities of practice in which their identities are changing with respect to (other) learners through their interdependent activities. (158)

As mentioned above, the students' engagement within the framework of the school is closely related to the life outside the school institution and the development of a cross-contextual

framework in relation to school engagement. Therefore, we need to address the barriers between the inside and the outside of school life. We need to focus on the resources the students have for coordinating their participation cross-contextually. The empirical works show that, in a number of situations, it is clear that it is up to the student herself or himself to individually coordinate his or her school activities with activities beyond the school setting. For the most part, it is up to the students to coordinate the family situation with school activities, it is up to students to develop a social belonging to the school and it is up to the students themselves to find a training place. This is not something that is institutionally mediated. If we take these results seriously, we might need to re-think the boundaries and responsibilities of institutional practice in order to make 'educational resources truly available for communities of learners', as mentioned above by Lave. It could be argued that it is important to understand the students' everyday conduct and how they are trying to coordinate their activities, and, furthermore, to institutionally support their efforts.

As argued by Hodkinson and Bloomer (2001), dropout policy is dominated by simplistic assumptions that are closely associated with the audit culture in education. The general attitude seems to be that with the large amount of public money spent on education, the service should be publicly accountable. In other words, the public should have 'value for money' invested in the educational sector. Accountability requires some measure of educational value that, in most cases, has been defined as outcomes of the educative process. One of the central outcomes has been an expectation that it would be possible for the educational institutions to lower dropout rates, thus leading to a search for the central mechanism that will develop a higher degree of retention. However, the 'dropout crisis' (Rumberger 2011) has demonstrated that many students drop out, and that educational institutions have not been able to perform better when it comes to retention and dropout rates. With this wave of 'accountability' running through the educational landscape, there has developed an assumption that the students who sign up for a course have clear and predetermined objectives. If these objectives are not met and the students drop out, then inadequate teaching and guidance are to blame for the students' dropping out (Hodkinson and Bloomer 2001, 118). In this respect, it is interesting that Martinez and Munday (1998) nearly 20 years ago showed that the dropout phenomenon was complex and had multiple causes. It seems that little has been learned about the phenomenon of dropping out when the politics of accountability is still being dominated by simplistic assumptions about dropout causes.

As indicated in this paper, a number of the reasons why students drop out are not directly related to what is happening in the school context. A number of other factors are involved in the processes of students' school engagement. These are closely related to the students' social life at the school and beyond the borders of the school; they are also closely related to the problems the students have and to family ties, substance abuse problems and more. Addressing the dropout problem from the perspective of the students' conduct of everyday life requires a broader view of this problem – one that sees it in a societal, rather than an institutional, context.

As outlined in this paper, engagement is distributed over different contexts; it is not simply something the students possess to varying degrees. This change in conceptual lenses could make a difference with respect to organising dropout prevention. Dropout prevention programmes have, at least in part, tended to focus on motivating the students to complete their education (Rumberger 2011). However, as indicated above, a number of students did

not lack engagement in their school's subject matter; instead, they were having a hard time integrating their activities in other contextual settings with the activities in the school.

Taking the notion of conduct of life seriously, prevention programmes should emphasise stronger support for the students' opportunities to integrate activities outside of the school context with activities that occur within the confines of an educational institution. Rather than trying to motivate the students and support their school engagement, schools should offer practical help in integrating educational tasks with activities that take place outside the school setting.

The main objective of this paper has been to re-frame the notion of school engagement and dropping out into a critical psychological frame that focuses on the students' conduct of everyday life to understand their main reasons for dropping out of the Danish VET system. One of the major weaknesses of the paper and the study is that it does not, in any systematic way, address the notions of gender, ethnicity and class regarding everyday life conduct. The next step in the research process would be to more systematically focus on how the cross-contextual dimension plays out in relation to gender, class and ethnicity.

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